

Neighborhood Workbook

Section Six: Learning About Your Planning Area

6



“Before you decide what you need, know what you already have. Before you decide what will be, know what might be.”

--Planning to Stay

Like the opening quote states, before your neighborhood begins thinking about the “how”, it must first identify the “what”. Likewise, in neighborhood planning, it is essential to know what is there today before we can talk about our hopes for the future. Developing a structured data collection process early is key to a successful planning effort. Be sure to collect both facts and impressions. For example, an area may possess a reputation for high crime, but police reports tell a different story. Because of this realization, a different solution would be sought, namely education of the public instead of beefing up security. Collecting data about your neighborhood places it under a magnifying glass and helps to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Once problems are identified and understood, data can be collected about the best solution as well as how other neighborhoods or communities may have dealt with the same problem or strength.



Key Learning Steps

How to gather the information

- Talk with people. Ask those who live, work, play, shop and gather for their thoughts. It is important to talk with all groups in the neighborhood. Take advantage of children's keen observation skills.
- Walk your planning area. One of the best ways to discover new information is by taking a walk around the area. Choose an area you may not be as familiar with and note your observations. Is the traffic as heavy? Are there more children playing? Does the housing style differ? Other surprises?
- Research, talk with the “experts”. Collect factual information about your neighborhood. When was it built? How many people who live there have graduated from high school? College? Once you understand your area's strengths and weaknesses, learn more about potential solutions. Talk with local experts who work in the area of your concern. Search the web. Call other cities. Talk with your neighbors.

Mission San Jose

Key Info (How to gather info)

Demographics Demographic information, such as educational attainment, income, ethnicity, age, and employment, can reveal a great deal about a community and its specific needs. Your neighborhood, for example, could use employment data to decide how it should plan for economic development. If your neighborhood's unemployment rate was comparatively high, your organization could include the desire to attract new businesses to the area as one of the goals in its plan.

The use of basic statistics like percentages is recommended. Using percentages will not only give you an accurate measurement of how the residents of your neighborhood are faring but it will also allow you to compare your neighborhood's measurements to citywide measurements.

The most helpful source of demographic information is the United States Census Bureau. Census information will help you understand your neighborhood better because it can provide demographics on the specific census tracts that comprise your neighborhood. Many communities use census information to attract new business or plan for growth. In fact, many religious groups use the census numbers to plan new facilities and programs for their congregations.

In addition, the information collected by the census is an important tool for government decision-making. The US Constitution mandates a census every 10 years to determine how many seats each state will have in the U. S. House of Representatives. The census also helps direct the distribution of billions of dollars in state and federal funding to areas that need them. The sidebar at right shows an example of demographic data that was used in a neighborhood plan.

Census information is available at the reference section of any San Antonio Public Library. United States Census information is also available *online* (See *Appendix 13 for web address*) . Texas state-specific census information can be found via Texas State Data Center at . In addition to the sources listed above, census data can also be obtained through City departments like the Planning Department.

Example Neighborhood Demographics

Neighborhood Age Breakdown		
Age Group	#	%
Under 5	902	8%
5-17	2,037	19%
18-24	1,041	10%
25-44	3,550	33%
45-64	1,660	15%
65 plus	1,662	15%

Income and Poverty		
	Neighborhood	City
Annual Median Household Income	\$14,730	\$23,584
Persons (%) below Poverty Level	3,958 (37%)	207,161 (23%)

Neighborhood Population Comparison		
Year	Neighborhood	% Change
1980	11,765	—
1990	10,873	-8%
1999	11,946	10%
2004	12,601	5%

City Population		
Year	City	% Change
1980	786,023	—
1990	935,933	10%
1999	1,192,300	27%
2004	1,297,100	9%

Map to the Future: A Land Use Map

Code	Land Use Categories
S	Single family residential
T	Duplex, triplex, quadplex. This also includes single family houses with a garage apartment or "granny flat" on the same property
M	Multi-Family or apartment complexes. Any property that has more than four dwelling units
C	Commercial and retail uses include restaurants, strip malls, gas stations, car dealerships, enclosed auto repair shops and free standing stores.
O	Office uses include office buildings, free standing banks and medical offices.
I	Industrial and manufacturing uses such as wholesaling, warehousing and any business dealing with the processing or manufacturing of goods. Businesses with outside storage also are classified as industrial.
P	Public or institutional uses such as schools, churches, hospitals, cemeteries, water towers or other utility oriented uses.
G	Parks and greenspace. Your neighborhood may want to note whether the park space is private or public.
V	Vacant property has no apparent use.

The Planning Department as well as other City departments can be accessed by calling (210) 207-7900.

For current labor market statistics, the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) is the most comprehensive resource available. Information from the TWC can be obtained by phone or accessing the online information from their web site. *(See Appendix 13 for web address and phone numbers)*

Existing Plans and Ongoing Activities Research -- In addition to the sources already mentioned, your neighborhood should research and create an inventory of existing plans, reports, or studies prepared for the area. The usefulness of each document should be evaluated before it is put to use by the Planning Team.

Ongoing activities conducted by City departments or other community development entities also should also be researched. For example, urban studies classes at area colleges and universities may have collected useful data regarding a specific issue like crime or the impact of a highway through an area of town.

Land Use Survey – Land use is a description of how each property (parcel) within your planning area is currently used. To complete a land use survey, volunteers will need to walk by each parcel and indicate its land use on a map. The most commonly utilized land use categories and codes are listed in the sidebar. Land use surveying is key to developing a land use plan, and also helps you recognize neighborhood assets, like vacant areas and open spaces that have the potential to be used more productively. Land use surveying can also identify problems such as incompatible uses, see the following example.

Land use surveys can be performed on foot or from a car, a "windshield" survey. Be sure to train your volunteers on the area and the different land use categories they will find. The Planning Department recommends using photos of each category as a visual example. Before you begin, your survey team will need:

1. Base maps of your area
2. Copies of the survey form
3. A team of volunteers

After the data is collected, the map categories can be color coded and a current land use map created.

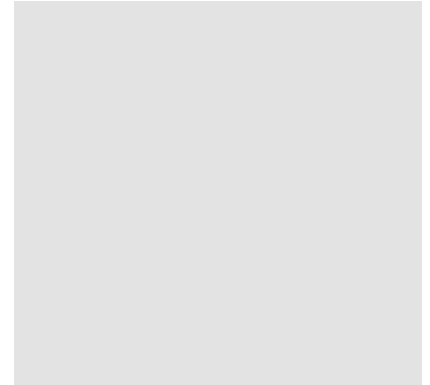
Zoning Analysis – In simple terms, zoning is the control used by the City to establish land uses. It is based on the idea that the government may protect the health, safety, and general welfare of its people by separating land uses it feels are incompatible from one another. The following example illustrates zoning's significance to the neighborhood planning process.

Zoning Analysis Example: When studying a highly industrial area near the railroad, you learn that there are several single family housing units and small locally owned businesses located there. By consulting the zoning maps you determine the entire area is zoned heavy industrial, even these parcels with a lower use (i.e., Residential and commercial). This information will be useful when future land uses for the area are discussed, agreement will need to be reached regarding the future use of the parcels.

Traffic, and Streets – Complaints about traffic are a major problem in many neighborhoods. Common problems are too much traffic and cars driving too fast in residential areas. One of the goals of the neighborhood should be reliable, accessible, and safe transportation for all residents. This means having options and choices. Because safe transportation also involves walking, a quick assessment of the sidewalk conditions and street lighting in your area also is necessary.

The physical condition of the streets in your neighborhood also is important. The condition of the pavement, the slope of the street, the drainage and the adequacy of street lighting should all be considered when conducting a street assessment.

Provided in appendix 7 is a worksheet that will help you conduct a Traffic, Streets, and Drainage Survey of your neighborhood. To evaluate traffic conditions in your neighborhood, contact the City Public Works Department to receive figures on both the average daily traffic and rush hour traffic on the main streets of your neighborhood.



Good street condition

The Public Works Department can be contacted by telephone or online. The San Antonio Police Department has statistics on accidents at intersections, which also may be helpful. These statistics can be found by searching the Police Department's website. (See Appendix 13 for web addresses and phone numbers)

Drainage -- When reviewing the drainage of your area, look at low water crossings, locations where water remains standing, and drainage culverts, in addition to the drainage of water from the streets.

Parks and Recreation – Because the world outside your community is a noisy and hectic place, parks and recreation provide an important resource to us. The city provides parks and recreational facilities where citizens can have fun, socialize, play a sport, quietly read, or just relax. However, the mere existence of these facilities is not enough. In order to be effective community assets, the parks and recreation centers in your area must be clean, safe, and properly maintained. In other words, a park that is unsafe, unused, and littered provides little benefit to your community. In fact, a park in this condition could detract from your neighborhood by becoming a hangout for gang members or illegal dump site.



Parks and recreational space

Collecting data on the condition of parks and recreational areas in your neighborhood will help you identify problems that should be addressed in your plan. For example, you may find that the public park in your community is marred by graffiti, littered with broken bottles, and inadequately lighted after dark. By making this observation you can then include increasing park security and maintenance as one of the goals in your plan.

A guide is located in appendix 8 of this workbook, which is designed to help you analyze the parks, recreation, and open space facilities in your neighborhood.

Social, Cultural, and Institutional Services – The opportunity to learn about other cultures, gather and socialize or take advantage of services is an important element of our communities that cannot be forgotten. These resources can help counteract the effects of economic or social instability in a distressed community or can help a strong community stay that way. For example, each

community should have access to the San Antonio Public Library System. Doing an assessment of the institutions already in your neighborhood will help to determine any gaps.

The types of social, cultural, and institutional services your neighborhood needs depend heavily upon the status of the people who comprise it. For example, proximity to a doctor or health clinic may be a service of utmost importance. If a large number of low-income children reside in your community, low-cost recreation centers or educational after-school programs are also extremely valuable resources.

A guide is provided in appendix 9 designed to help you evaluate the social, cultural, and institutional services which may be located (or may need to be located) in your neighborhood.

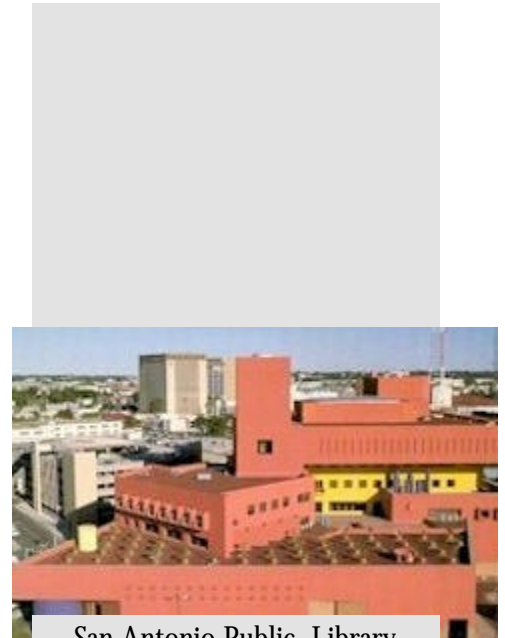


Other Information

Neighborhood History – When planning for the future, it helps to have a firm understanding of the past. Researching historical information may reveal trends and help clarify your neighborhood's place in San Antonio history. However, the most important information historical data can uncover is insight into how and why your neighborhood became the way it is. Whether your neighborhood is old or young, conducting thorough historical research is helpful to the outcome of your neighborhood plan. General sources for historical data include: state and regional histories, city and county histories, directories, maps, atlases, photographs, city and neighborhood newspapers and newsletters, Census reports, abstracts of titles and deeds, land surveys, public school records, previous City of San Antonio studies and other public records.

In addition to these general sources, there are some special resources available to you at the neighborhood level, including neighborhood business records, church records, private letters and diaries, keepsakes, heirlooms and relics, and interviews with longtime residents and merchants.

Much of the material needed to research historical data on older or historic neighborhoods can be found on the 6th floor of the San Antonio Central Library in the Texana sec-



San Antonio Public Library

Computer Resource Access

Though you may not own a computer, you do have access to online resources. Both Palo Alto and St. Philip's Colleges maintain open lab policies, which permit members of the community to utilize their computing facilities. The George Ozuna Learning Resources Center at Palo Alto College includes both a state-of-the-art computer lab as well as a library where community members may checkout a limited number of books. All adults over age 18 are permitted to use the Center's computing facilities. The Ozuna Center can be reached by telephone at 921-5100 or online at www.accd.edu/pac/lrc/index.htm.

St Philip's computer labs are open to community members of all ages. A listing of labs and their individual telephone numbers can be obtained by calling 531-3200 or by contacting the St Phillip's College Information Technologies website at www.accd.edu/spc/it/computerlabs.htm.

The Alamo Community College District also offers the use of its district computer lab. The Advanced IT Center (AITC) provides internet training courses and wordprocessing tutorials to large groups, like your neighborhood organization. Registration information can be obtained via the AITC's help-desk at 220-1616 or the Center can also be found online at www.accd.edu/is/html/aitc.html.

In addition to the resources mentioned above, the San Antonio Public Library System provides computing facilities with internet access. You can call your local library to find out if internet training workshops are offered there.

tion, at the San Antonio Conservation Society Library or the City of San Antonio Historic Preservation Division. (See *Appendix 13 for web addresses and phone numbers*)

Examples of questions you might seek to answer through the study of your neighborhood's history are provided in appendix 10.

Housing Conditions Survey – Housing is key to every neighborhood. Other than the neighbors, the housing is the basic defining element of a neighborhood.

It may be helpful to create a code to classify each house in your neighborhood. An example might look like:

Excellent condition: no repairs needed

Fair condition: the structure is fine, but paint and landscaping are needed.

Poor condition: the house needs paint and there are repairs needed for windows and trim, pillars or architectural details

Dangerous premises: the house has been burned or is structurally unsound.

A more in depth housing survey is attached in Appendix 10.



A Guide to Neighborhood Surveys -- Aside from the Census and other published data, collecting information on your own is a good way to get up to date information on your specific neighborhood. It is important to note that surveys can be used to collect much more than factual data. To receive the full benefit of your neighborhood survey, use it to uncover feelings neighbors have regarding different problems, assets, possibilities, issues, and desires in addition to factual information. Devising your own survey questionnaire provides you with the opportunity to shape questions that are specific to your neighborhood and the issues it encounters. Furthermore, direct communication with your neighborhood's residents and business owners provides insight that can be more valuable than second-hand data.

Despite the benefits of interviewing your community, conducting neighborhood surveys can be costly and time-

consuming. Your neighborhood might want to consider sampling a small representative population of your community rather than surveying the entire group. Although it is true that the bigger the sample, the more accurate the data, your neighborhood organization should keep in mind that it often is both impractical and unnecessary to survey everyone. Your survey sample should be selected at random in order to ensure fair results. All subsections of your neighborhood should be represented in the sampling procedure. For example, you may decide to contact every third house on a block or every fifth person or business listed in your neighborhood directory. The number of community members surveyed should be dependent upon the availability of time, volunteers, and funding. Wordy or complex survey questions that the average person would have a difficult time understanding or evaluating should be avoided. Area high schools or colleges math, statistics, sociology or urban studies classes may be interested in doing some of the legwork and data analysis for you, but it is important that the neighbors remain actively involved.

Many surveying techniques are available to your neighborhood. A listing and brief description of the most popular methods follows below. Your neighborhood group may choose to employ only one of these methods or a combination of them.

Types of Surveys

♦ **Door-to-Door Survey** – This type of survey is a very time-consuming and labor-intensive method but it tends to produce the greatest response rate. It is not recommended for very large neighborhoods, in this case a smaller sampling of the area may be as useful.

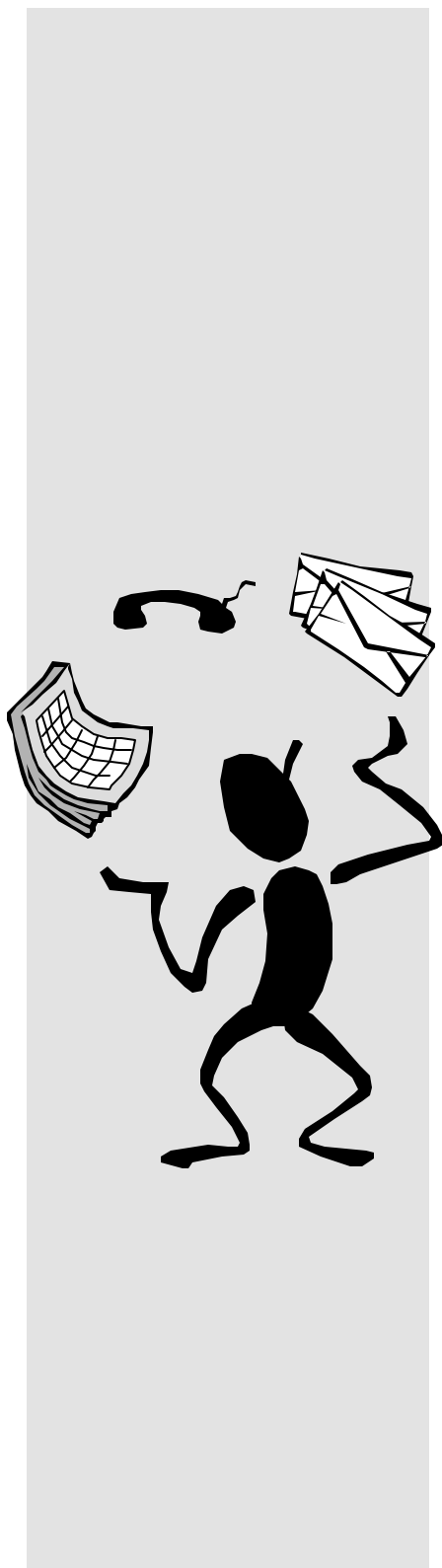
You may conduct the survey by reading questions aloud to respondents or by allowing them to fill it out themselves while you wait. If you choose to read the questions, remember that you can change the nature of the data and add bias to the survey's results with verbal and nonverbal reactions. To avoid biasing respondents' answers, remain neutral as you ask all questions and try not to give off physical cues as to what you are thinking.

Provide respondents with a telephone number where they

Other Information Sources

In addition to the conventional resources described in this section, the following unconventional sources of information may also be helpful when researching the status of your neighborhood's residents:

- City Public Services Office
- Chamber of Commerce serving your neighborhood
- local homebuilder's associations
- AT&T
- The United Way
- League of Women Voters
- San Antonio Housing Authority
- San Antonio Renters' Association
- Local housing and/or tenant's rights groups
- Regional councils.



can ask questions about the on-going survey process or the survey's results and always volunteer your results to respondents either in person, by mail, or by telephone.

Your credibility is on the line when you conduct a door-to-door survey. Keep your promises of confidentiality and anonymity, particularly when you do receive results.

Before initiating your door-to-door survey, decide on the number of days you will conduct it and do not add to your original figure. Though it is important that everyone be given a chance to participate, you must set deadlines or the process can get off schedule.

You should also include a short explanation of the survey's purpose, persons who will see the responses, and when and where to return the survey. It is important to note that door-to-door survey questions should be shorter and less complex than mail-out surveys. When wording door-to-door survey questions, keep in mind that you will be reading them aloud to respondents who may be vision-impaired, illiterate, or disabled. Include a variety of language and wording to keep your respondents involved and interested in the process.

♦ **The Mail-Out Survey** – Keep the mail-out survey short and concise, too many questions will discourage respondents. Yes and no questions are the simplest to calculate the results. Ask only questions that will provide you with information you need and can use. You should include a copy of your flyer in other languages if the population of your area calls for it. A sample mail-out survey is provided in the appendix 12. Give people a set deadline to return the survey and include a phone number for clarification or questions. Let people know how and when they will be informed of the survey's results.

This method is less time-consuming than the door-to-door method. Even so, its response rate is markedly lower. Postage expenses and the greater need for office supplies means that this method will have more direct costs. This method is recommended for neighborhood organizations with limited volunteers. However, mail-out surveys are discouraged in neighborhoods with high rates of illiteracy. It is suggested that surveys be sent to residents and businesses

with a neighborhood logo on it for instant identification. A better response is ensured if the survey is already addressed and stamped for return mail or a convenient drop-off point is identified.

♦ **Telephone** – Similar to a mail-out survey, a telephone survey is less time-consuming and is a good choice for neighborhoods that are particularly pressed for time. Another advantage of telephone surveys is that they are usually very cost-efficient. Nonetheless, telephone surveying may not be appropriate in all areas. A sample telephone survey is provided in the appendix. The sample questions will help you devise your own telephone survey.

♦ **Single Point of Contact** - This type of survey involves the setting-up of a booth or stand at a central location such as the local mall. Incentives such as raffles or prizes can be used to attract passers-by to stop and complete the survey. While this method is simple and easy to perform, it is not very efficient or effective. Central locations do not always represent an entire community. Moreover, people tend to ignore survey booths when they are busy doing other things.

How to Use Survey Results

Remember that the data you collect with this type of informal research is at best suggestive. It will only enable you to talk about what may be the case for the neighborhood surveyed rather than what is the case. Your use of the information gathered should reflect your awareness of the limitation of the findings. You will need to use appropriate hedges (i.e., "might be", "possibly", "could be", "it can be argued that", etc.) and disclaimers (i.e., "The survey tentatively identifies", "Further research is necessary to", etc.).

While administering your survey, remember that there are many opportunities for bias to creep in when the analysis is conducted. This is especially true when reading a survey aloud. Therefore, interpreting and summarizing the results of interview-style surveys can be dangerous when in the hands of inexperienced or improperly trained persons.

